

## Writing Tip: Write in Active Voice

Adapted from *Writing to Get Things Done*® seminar

When you write in business, you will be more effective when you use plain language. This means using short words, short sentences...and active voice. Use the active voice when you want to be direct, brief, and natural.



Stan Berry

People use the active voice almost entirely when speaking because it is natural and easy to understand. However, one of the unproductive things people do when they write is to use a lot of unnecessary passive voice. They do this in an attempt to make their writing sound more formal, educated and professional. This is unfortunate for their readers, particularly when the readers are not familiar with the content. That is why a technician can describe a process in passive voice and everyone who knows the process can follow their train of thought, but uninitiated readers are lost.

### The Voices of Active and Passive

Active Voice: You can complete the conversion.

Passive Voice: The conversion can be completed by you.

To determine active/passive voice, follow this three step process.

You can complete the conversion

subject      verb

1. Find the verb – look for the action.
2. Find the subject – ask, “Who/what completed the conversion?”
3. Determine active/passive – ask, “Is the subject doing the action?”

Yes



Active  
Voice

No



Passive  
Voice

### **About Active Voice**

In active voice, the subject is active. The subject is doing the verb. Some hints about the active voice:

- The subject and the doer of the verb are the same.
- The doer of the verb comes before the verb.

### **About Passive Voice**

In passive voice, the subject is passive. The subject is receiving the verb. Some hints about the passive voice:

- The subject doesn't do anything—it receives the action
- The doer is *never* the subject of the verb and often is not mentioned.

However, there are legitimate reasons for using the passive voice, as when:

- You don't want to say who did what. *The report was not prepared promptly.*
- You want to finesse with tone. *Your check wasn't enclosed* is less accusatory than *You did not enclose your check.*
- The doer is obvious or unimportant. *Each visitor was given a meal ticket.*

### **Passive Voice Creates Abstract Sentences**

Because the doer is not mentioned, the reader's attention is focused on the act. The act is difficult to visualize since no one is around to do it.

Example: *It has been determined that the label will be designed to enable high visibility for the reader.* (abstract)

### **Active Voice Creates Concrete Sentences**

Because the doer of the action is mentioned, we have a concrete focal point of who's doing the action. We can easily visualize the action.

Example: *To further increase the visibility of the label, the team decided that the label should have a red border.* (concrete)

Remember, verbs move the thought of the sentence. Put people reference words, such as *I, we, the team, quality control,* before the verb. It quickens the dawn of thought and sparks clear communication. So, revise unnecessary passive voice verbs to make your language clear and natural--and reading simple and quick.



*Stan Berry has devoted the past 34 years to improving the writing skills of over 55,000 business and government professionals. After completing his Master's degree from Yale University, he co-authored five books on writing that he uses in his seminars. He's been a member of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) since 1975 when he served as the newsletter editor and on the Board of Directors for the Twin Cities Chapter. Stan can be reached at [www.BerryWritingGroup.com](http://www.BerryWritingGroup.com) or 612-578-1487.*

*Stu Tanquist has presented at four American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) National Leadership and TechKnowledge conferences and written two best selling ASTD Info-Lines. With over 20 years in the learning and development field, Stu's expertise has ranged from working as a professional trainer to serving as a strategic-level director for training and development. He holds three degrees including a Masters in management. Stu can be reached at [Stu@BerryWritingGroup.com](mailto:Stu@BerryWritingGroup.com) or 612-799-1686.*



**Stu Tanquist**



**Sign-up to receive free Writing Tips by email at [www.BerryWritingGroup.com](http://www.BerryWritingGroup.com)**

*© Copyright 2010 Berry Writing Group, Inc.  
All Rights Reserved*

*This document may not be reproduced or distributed when used in conjunction with any for-profit endeavor or instructional activity without prior written authorization.*